DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 047 CS 215 142

AUTHOR Parker, Elaine F.
TITLE Speaking of Portfolios: Contrasting Images.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational History; *Language Usage; *Metaphors; *Portfolio Assessment; Portfolios (Background Materials); *Student Evaluation; Student Needs; Writing (Composition); *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background

ABSTRACT

Since the first definitive references to portfolio evaluation in assessment literature, metaphors have been significant in shaping students' and teachers' understanding of the role of the portfolio in the writing classroom. Consider the range of metaphors employed in discussions about portfolios. Margie Krest, for instance, emphasizes the social and human-side of learning and the organic nature of process in her organic metaphor of the portfolio as a "living, breathing documentation" of how students interact with their work as they "struggle with ideas." She elaborates, "Their folders literally grow"; they are "living documents of change." Such humanistic and expressionistic metaphors of the 1960s and 1970s gave way in the 1980s to corporate management models of profitability. As accountability became the cry, the metaphor of a tool became operative. Educators spoke of "assessment tools valued for accuracy" and the "check on teaching deficits." The metaphor of a "vehicle" has also gained circulation in discussion of assessments. In discussion of portfolios, "vehicle" has taken on a range of meanings from "vehicle of pursuing student empowerment" to "vehicle for pursuing audits." Reviewing the literature suggests, regrettably, that there has been a general movement away from precious humanistic metaphors that emphasize process over product. Of these new metaphors, "showcase" is the most troublesome because of its emphasis on product. (Contains 55 references.) (TB)

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SPEAKING OF PORTFOLIOS: CONTRASTING IMAGES

ED 390 047

From the first definitive references to portfolio evaluation in assessment literature, metaphor has been significant in shaping our understanding of the portfolio. To demonstrate the scope of that characterization, some of those metaphors are listed below. The body of this study, however, is a backward glance at the more prominent images of the portfolio in assessment literature to give a sense of the evolution of portfolio evaluation over the last two decades, but also to remind educators to be more sensitive in their choice of language when speaking or writing of the portfolio. It is they who will determine the future of the portfolio--whether those qualities for which it has been most valued will survive.

"the carrot" as opposed to "the big stick" of standardized testing (Ford and Larkin)

"room to breathe and grow and enjoy the views along the way" (Burnham)

"living, breathing documentation of change," "a conversation among stances" (Krest, Portfolio News)

"an empowerment tool" (Elliot and Harriman)

"a gateway," "an antidote," "an instrument," "a light," "mirror validity," "a vehicle," "a mechanism for teachers to work together," "a mechanism for trying to goose the student into better writing," "tracking tool" (Elbow and Belanoff)

"a window through which to perceive and understand the learning taking place in schools,"

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"a vehicle for student empowerment and teacher change" (Weinbaum)

"a cornerstone of a pedagogy class" (Bishop)

"a scale that measures growth" (Sommers)

"a reflection for exposing the edge of students' thought" (Camp and Levine)

"aggregate of experience," "a maze where walls rearrange themselves with every step you take" (Paulsons)

" interwoven into the fabric of the classroom," "catalyst," "album," "celebration," "vehicle for administration, teacher, student," "links that draw the parent into the classroom," "broader or better pictures" (Tierney, Desai and Carter)

"showcase...an archivist's collection" (Sommers, Tierney, Desai and Carter)

"hub," "intersection" (Moffett, Paulsons)

"a photo album or scrapbook of multi-dimensional proportions" (Assessment Forum)

"passport to the paid working place," "a way to capture growth" (Portfolio News)

Some of my readers may argue that metaphor is embellishment and what I have done is to fall into that trap which, Francis Bacon warned, leads writers "to study words and not matter" (Halloran 181). But modern rhetoricians and linguists have demonstrated that metaphor is the "imaginative" side of reason and is actually central to critical thought (Lakeoff and Johnson). Metaphor is one of the ways we categorize and reference information as we strive to understand new concepts and experiences. The term "portfolio evaluation" itself has relied upon the analogy of the artist's portfolio

for definition, and the characterization of "portfolio evaluation" has been largely shaped by the metaphors of its proponents. Particularly in the early literature, those metaphors revealed a commitment to the natural organic development of process writing.

It was this characterization of the portfolio by Christopher Burnham in an early eighties' writing assessment article which first attracted me to the portfolio. The title of the article was "Portfolio Evaluation: Room to Breathe and Grow." Although I soon forgot Burnham's name, the metaphor of his article's title remained vivid in my mind and was instrumental in my researching portfolio evaluation as an assessment method for my writing classes.

Burnham's metaphor reflects the framework of growth and development in which I perceive portfolio assessment. The imagery is spatial, representing the time delay in grading. Allowing students time (or "room") to risk and to temper the frustration they feel in the early stages of the semester (when they are less likely to succeed) is a common consideration of teachers designing portfolio systems. Burnham's article describes the anxiety and frustration of traditional evaluation and offers the portfolio as an alternative which allows "plenty of room to breathe and grow and enjoy the scenes along the way" (133-145).

Many organic/nurturing metaphors have subsequently appeared in portfolio literature, but the strongest

characterization has been that of Margie Krest (30-33) and the Portfolio News (1990), who emphasize the social character of learning as well as the precious humanistic qualities of the portfolio and the organic nature of process--for example, Krest's description of the portfolio as "a living, breathing documentation" of how the students interact with their work as they "struggle with ideas" (30). She elaborates, "Their folders literally grow," and a few pages later she focuses on portfolios as "living documents of change" and "making students' understanding visible" (33).

The emphasis placed on the interaction of students with their writing in Krest's imagery suggests the dialectical experience which frames her concept of portfolio assessment and the recursive nature of thought and writing, but it also reflects the transactional reading theory of Louise Rosenblatt and Vygotsky's premise that learning is a social activity. The personification of the portfolio as "living, breathing..." (Krest) and "organic, warm and lively" (Portfolio News) prompts the reader to think of a "nonhuman entity" in terms of human motivations and activities (Metaphors We Live By 33).

These were the humanistic metaphors of cognitivists and expressionists, evolved from the liberal sixties and seventies but challenged in the eighties when the Republican administrations used "corporate management models of profitability" as templates to reorganize public institutions (Murphy 212). Accountability in education became a mainstream

cry, and one of the images chosen to represent that characteristic was the "tool"--not just any "tool," but the "tool" to get the job done. "Nationally normed achievement tests" were celebrated as the "assessment tools valued for accuracy," and the prevailing imagery chosen to represent that characteristic was drawn from accounting and banking--"accountability" was the "bottom line," and the objective, a "check on teaching deficits" (Murphy, Elbow, Tierney, Paulson).

"Tools" have been a popular image peppered throughout educational texts, including traditional assessment literature. "Tools" are commonplace, familiar objects in everyday life, and the concept of a "tool" facilitating work is readily understood. When traditionalists called for "accuracy," proponents of the portfolio responded that their new "measuring tool," was a new, more "valuable tool," a "tool for change." Standardized testing may be "accurate," but the portfolio is "authentic" because it reflects the new process theories of writing and "tracks" the growth of the students and their writing from first to final drafts as well as from assignment to assignment. The portfolio is the "power tool" because it enhances motivation as it allows students to assume responsibility for their learning. The portfolio is not just an "assessment" tool, but a "pedagogical" and "learning" tool as well (Ford and Larkin, Burnham, Elbow, Belanoff, Paulsons, Tierney, Desai, Carter, Sommers, Hamp-lyons and Condon, Eliott

and Harriman).

Although the portfolio as a tool metaphor is usually a positive one, there is an exception. Tierney warns that unless the portfolio is student centered, it is just "another teacher tool" (18). What is explicit in this example--that the portfolio must be student centered--is implied in the context of other tool metaphors. Ford and Larkin, in literature published almost two decades ago, dub conventional assessment the "big stick" and the portfolio, "the carrot." They warn that the portfolio which is teacher centered could become the "bigger stick" instead of the "carrot" and even suggest the portfolio can be "part stick" and "part carrot" depending upon its design by the teacher and the need to prod the student into writing better (952).

Like the "tool," the "vehicle" metaphor, is also adapted from the jargon of traditional assessment literature. The "vehicle" in traditional assessment literature is used as a synonym to the words "medium" or "means"; for example, standardized tests are an "assessment vehicle." But in portfolio literature the word vehicle becomes charged and elaborated, and its characterization changes with the particular controversy at hand.

When the "vehicle" is the portfolio, it is a "vehicle for exploration and discovery," referring to the delay in grading addressed earlier in this paper and the safe environment in which to risk (Elbow, Belanoff, Tierney, Desai

and Carter, Paulsons, Sommers). The focus on development rather than pecking-order achievement leads to a portrayal of the portfolio as "a vehicle for student empowerment" (Elbow). Sometimes curriculum is the vehicle, and portfolio proponents are concerned with "who's driving?" They ask, "Is assessment driving curriculum?" referring to teachers teaching to tests, and "Is assessment wresting control out of teachers' hands?" (Elbow, Paulson, Tierney).

In recent times the portfolio "vehicle" appears to be "souped up," and there must be an engine under the hood, for this vehicle is often referred to as "pursuing." In at least one case, as if to legitimize the portfolio by using one of traditional assessment's favorite metaphorical concepts, "accuracy," the portfolio becomes "a vehicle for pursuing audits" for the administration while for the teacher it remains "a vehicle for pursuing student empowerment" (Tierney, Desai, Carter). The portfolio's adaptability is indeed well represented with the vehicle metaphor, and the animation with which the metaphor is energized mirrors the creative nature of the portfolio.

One of my favorite metaphors for the portfolio is the "hub around which learning, teaching and assessment recur" because it suggests a radial schematic model with the portfolio as the center "linking" learning, instruction and evaluation as they evolve from constant interaction (Moffett, Elbow, Paulsons). There is an impulse to add, "like the gears of a

watch," but actually, that would totally ignore our first life experience with "linking," as George Lakoff reminds his readers--the umbilical cord and those social and familial connections which are vital in life (274). The portfolio represented by the metaphor "hub" is further substantiated by Lakeoff and Johnson's "center-perhiphery schema" representing the importance which people attach to the center, as opposed to the peripheral parts, of living things: "the center defines the identity of the individual in a way that the peripheral parts do not" (Fire 274).

The "hub" metaphor argues for the authenticity of the portfolio as an assessment system by portraying the perpetual interaction of learning, teaching and assessment. It is an ongoing process that fosters development. Furthermore, because the portfolio is instruction as well as assessment, it requires the interaction of both teacher and student, and when students participate in the process, they not only develop a sense of authorship, but a more comprehensive understanding of achievement as well.

Of the dozens of new metaphors appearing in recently published articles and books, there appears to be a trend to deviate from the precious humanistic qualities of the portfolio and the organic nature of process. Of all these metaphors, the "showcase" is the image which I find most troublesome simply because it can easiy be misunderstood as a focus on product (Tierney, Desai and Carter). Instead of looking at the

evolution of an idea from the point of invention to final draft and the development of a writer over a period of time, the "showcase" implies the exhibiting of students' polished drafts in juxtaposition like the "showcase" of gems in a jewelry store. The only point of reference is the product of another student. So, not only is the focus on product, but the measurement becomes a comparison of one student with another rather than the growth of the individual writer and the development of her/his writing. This shortcoming was made alarmingly clear to me by one of my seminar students, an elementary school teacher in a small western town.

Mary had read about the portfolio as a "showcase" and had used that as her model to design a portfolio system for her kindergarten class. She defined the "showcase" as an exhibit of the "best or most valued," again, like the "showcase" in a jewelry store. Consequently, only her "talented" students were allowed to create a portfolio. These students would showcase their writing. Mary explained it would be very embarrassing to "showcase" the work of her slower students.

As I listened to Mary, images of my grandaughter came to mind. Her development has been labeled "slow" when compared to other children her age. In Mary's class, Heather would not be able to have the joy of creating a portfolio which would highlight her strengths and motivate her to overcome the obstacles which have given her difficulty, and Mary would not have the advantage of seeing before her the picture of

Heather's development and those obstacles she might help Heather to overcome. When Heather discovered that her pencil made circles as well as straight lines, I celebrated her discovery. It did not matter to me that other children may have made that discovery earlier.

Although the metaphors I have analyzed in this paper are only a small fraction of the imagery interspersed throughout assessment literature to portray the portfolio, these few have demonstrated that the way we speak and write about the portfolio is important in reflecting the kind of characterization we wish the portfolio to have. I have demonstrated how Christopher Burnham's spatial metaphor and Margie Krest's personification provided the model for defining and valuing the concepts which distinguish the portfolio. I have shown how the tool, vehicle and hub metaphors provide a clever heuristic analysis which reenforces those qualities of growth and development valued about the portfolio. The showcase metaphor, however, is an example of a metaphor which may inadvertently steer portfolio novitiates away from those qualities which have always distinguished the portfolio from other methods of assessment. If we want the portfolio to maintain the image which has made it valued and appropriate to the process theories of writing, then we should, indeed, think carefully about the metaphors we use to speak and write about portfolio assessment.

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